

News from the Wyoming Department of Health and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department

Monday, December 10, 2007

Wyoming Residents Advised to Avoid Eating Fish High in Mercury

The Wyoming Department of Health and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department are advising state residents to be mindful about mercury levels in fish they eat. In addition to some saltwater fish, the agencies are advising caution when consuming certain fish from Big Horn, Seminoe and Pathfinder reservoirs.

“Eating fish with high amounts of mercury can cause health problems, especially in children,” said Timothy Ryan, environmental public health section chief with the Wyoming Department of Health.

“In general, Wyoming fish are low in mercury,” Ryan said. “But we are recommending that women of childbearing age, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children under the age of 15 should eat more small Wyoming-caught fish and fewer large fish, and should avoid eating channel catfish, bass, sauger and walleye from certain waters.”

Specifically, the agencies offer the following guidelines:

- Women of childbearing age, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children under 15 are advised to consume no more than two meals per week of fish that are low in mercury. People in that group should not eat fish that are considered high in mercury.
- For others, the agencies are advising prudent consumption of fish low in mercury and no more than one to two meals per month of fish high in mercury.
- Freshwater fish low in mercury include: Wyoming-caught trout and farm-raised tilapia and catfish.
- Freshwater fish high in mercury include: channel catfish, sauger, and walleye from Big Horn, Seminoe and Pathfinder reservoirs.

Mike Stone, fisheries chief with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, explained that fish size is a factor affecting mercury levels. “The longer a fish lives the greater its chances of accumulating mercury in its tissues,” Stone said. “In general, fish that feed on other fish or bottom-feeders are also more likely to accumulate mercury.”

Game and Fish has conducted baseline surveys on major reservoirs around the state for several years. Fish from the majority of waters exhibited low levels of mercury. A few waters warranted additional testing, which led to the fish consumption advisory. Mercury is a naturally occurring element that is distributed throughout the environment by both natural processes and human activities.

Specific recommendations are available on the Department of Health's website and are included in the 2008-09 Wyoming Fishing Regulations, which will be available at Game and Fish offices and license selling agents on January 1, 2008. The recommendations include information about various fish types and bodies of water in the state, and are based on current information from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. Future guidelines may change as further testing results become available.

Ryan emphasized that finding mercury in fish is not unique to Wyoming. "In fact, all other states except Alaska have previously issued similar fish consumption advisories for their citizens."

For more information about mercury levels in saltwater species, and for more information about the guidelines, go to www.health.wyo.gov.

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